

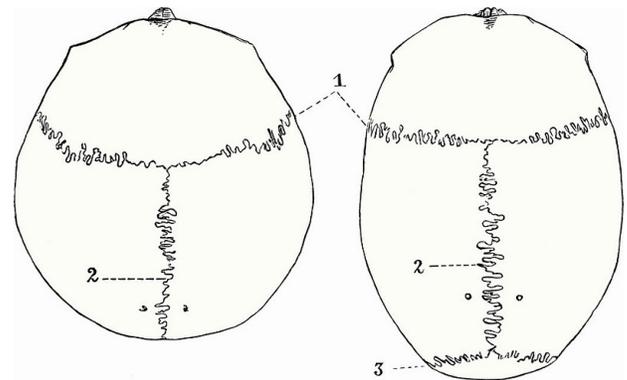
["Ur-writings Excerpt" by schrimshaw on Soundcloud](#)

Notes on Geophonography

Will Schrimshaw

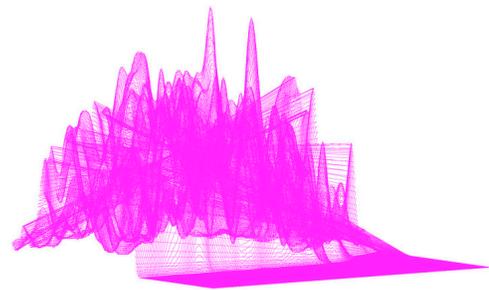
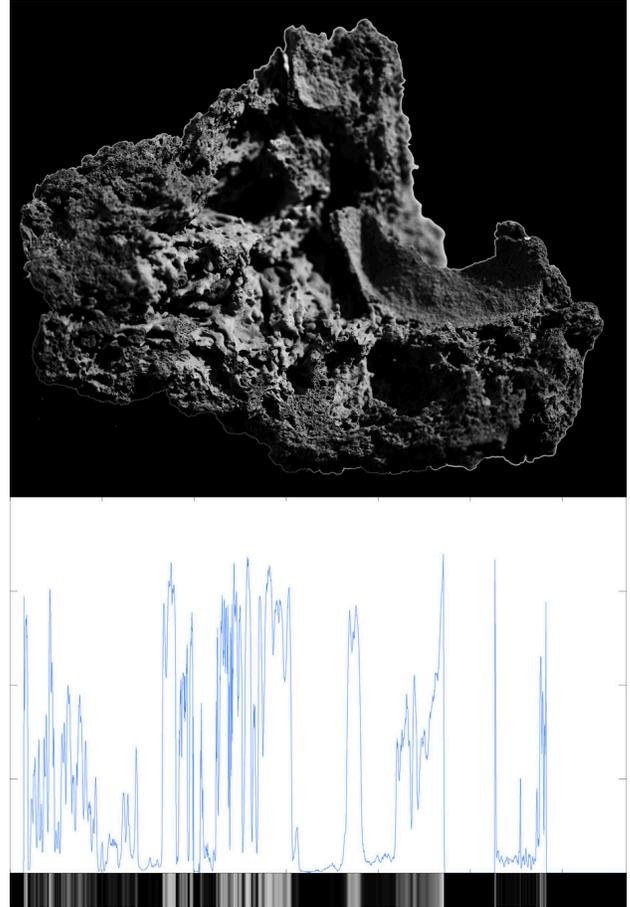
The above excerpt is taken from Ur-writings (2011) a 43 minute single channel audio piece. The practice of geophonography, of which *Ur-writings* is a single instance, submits to "Rilke's urgent demand to put under the needle and try out a 'variety of lines, occurring anywhere'", putting under the needle a selection of lines found impressed upon the earth (Kittler 1999: 48). Kittler recounts Rilke's confession of a desire to drag a stylus along the coronal suture, thereby releasing into the world a "primal sound", a decoding of that which "nobody had encoded and that encoded nothing":

"A trace or path appears where the frontal and parietal bones of the "suckling infant" [...] have grown together [...] the naked eye is now able to read the coronal suture as a writing of the real [...] Before [Rilke], nobody had ever suggested to decode a trace that nobody had encoded and that encoded nothing [...] Ever since the invention of the phonograph, there has been writing without a subject. It is no longer necessary to assign an author to every trace, not even God." (1999: 44).



In *Ur-writings*, the "writing of the real" that Kittler, via Rilke, finds written into the skull is identified in outcrops puncturing the surface of the earth, the writing of the real thereby shifted from a somatic to a telluric substrate. This shift in an identification of

the “writing of the real” mirrors that of a shift in the siting of the real from the body to the earth; the return of the real chronicled by Foster (1996) saw art return from the text to the body, to the flesh via trauma, echoing the sense that “one of the definitions of the Lacanian Real is that it is the flayed body, the palpitation of the raw, skinless read flesh” (Zizek 2004: 116). Where the Lacanian real is sited just below the surface of the skin—and so the coronal suture of such interest to both Rilke and Kittler would serve as a suitable example of this siting—geophonographic tracing of the writing of the real locates the real in the geological, in the bedrock existing just beneath and occasionally puncturing the surface of the earth. Despite this re-siting, this repetition of a return of the real is no less traumatic, or rather geotraumatic. As a consequence of this shift, the primal sound that Rilke’s muted desire to trace the coronal suture promised to release into the world is replaced with a “fundamental noise” that might equally well be associated with the real (Zizek 2004: 115).



That the noises produced in the production of *Ur-writings* are reminiscent of vinyl run-off was a happy accident—if not entirely unpredictable. The production process is as follows:

1. capture grayscale images of outcrops.
2. convert images into a series of waveforms by reading grayscale pixel values as elevation & audio sample magnitudes. Each pixel in an image is converted to a single

audio sample. One row of pixels thereby produces one waveform. Through this method a single image produces numerous waveforms.

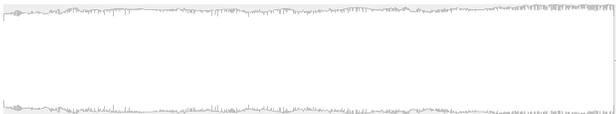
3. production of a final waveform through either the sequential or simultaneous playback of all the waveforms derived from an image.

The following audio examples were developed during the production of *Ur-writings*; they constitute a series of failed attempts but should help to clarify the process outlined above. Playback of all waveforms derived from a single image simultaneously results in somewhat condensed output:



["T5 Simultaneous" by schrimshaw on Soundcloud](#)

Where the waveforms derived from the same image are arranged sequentially before playback the output is greatly extended revealing gradual shifts in spectral and rhythmic composition from layer to layer:

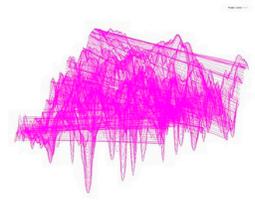


["T5 Sequential" by schrimshaw on Soundcloud](#)

If all of the waveforms produced in the production of *Ur-writings* are played back simultaneously the length of the piece is shortened from forty-three minutes to under two seconds:



["KE Simultaneous" by schrimshaw on Soundcloud](#)



The similarity of the sound produced via this method to vinyl run-off was particularly welcome and is most clearly evident in the *Ur-writings* excerpt above. The linking of a telluric noise source—rather than the noise or, worse, music of the earth—to phonographic inscription is not new; the notion of a fundamental noise—as discussed by Zizek (2004: 114-5)—that might compel us to return to a grounding in the real also occurred to Ballard, for whom the form of the phonograph and the curves of the needle indexed an archaeopsychic past:

"A faint scratching noise came from a portable record player on the floor at Bodkin's feet, a single three-inch disc spinning on its turntable. Generated mechanically by the pick-up head, the almost imperceptible sounds of a deep slow drumming reached Kerans, lost as the record ended and Bodkin switched off the player" (Ballard 2008: 36).

Later in *The Drowned World* we find Kerans speculating on the impact and significance of these noises:

"Just as psychoanalysis reconstructs the original traumatic situation in order to release the repressed material, so we are now being plunged back into the archaeopsychic past, uncovering the ancient taboos and drives that have been dormant for epochs [...] The further down the CNS you go [...] you descend back into neuronc past" [...] Bodkin moved back to his desk, ran his hand over the rack of records. Listening distantly to Bodkin's quiet, unhurried voice, Kerans toyed with the notion that the row of parallel black discs was a model of a neurophonic spinal column. He remembered the faint drumming emitted by the record-player in Hardman's cabin, and its strange undertones. Perhaps the conceit was closer to the truth than he imagined?" (Ballard 2008: 43-4).

Here we arrive at the terminal point of geophonographic speculation: the desire to put the surface of the earth under the needle and the

suspicion that to do so entails indexing an archival substrate implicated in or immanent to one's own mind.

Notes

1. *Ur-writings* was first exhibited at Science Friction, Copenhagen, as part of the Pitch Drop exhibition in in 2013. The piece was played outside the entrance to the gallery space through a single speaker positioned beneath a grille, projecting the sound upwards from the earth below. *Ur-writings* was broadcast in full every Tuesday at 15:00 BST on Basic FM from 16th June to 30th September 2014.
2. A broad geophonographic tendency can be identified in the work of Katie Patterson, Doug Aitken and Jens Brand amongst others.

REFERENCES

- [1] Ballard, J. G. (2008) *The Drowned World*. London: Harper Perennial.
- [2] Foster, H. (1996) *The Return of the Real: The Avant-garde at the End of the Century* Cambridge: The MIT Press.
- [3] Kittler, F. (1999) *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- [4] Zizek, S. (2004) *The Metastases of Enjoyment*. London and New York: Verso.